



Royal college told to stop taking money from infant formula milk firms

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London

Paediatricians have told their college to stop taking money from infant formula milk manufacturers in a vote at the college's annual general meeting (AGM).

Some 66 delegates at the AGM of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) voted in favour of a motion that urged it to "decline any commercial transactions or any other kind of funding or support" from all companies that market breast milk substitutes. Some 53 delegates voted against the motion.¹

The motion is not binding, however, and in a statement college president Neena Modi said that the "implications of the vote" would be considered at the next council meeting in July. A spokesperson for the college said that it was too early to say what the next steps would be.

Modi said, "Breastfeeding gives children the best start to lifelong health. The RCPCH considers the promotion of formula over breastfeeding in healthy infants to be unacceptable. The RCPCH also recognises the importance of the availability of safe alternatives to breast feeding and specialised products for preterm and sick infants."

The motion, proposed by Charlotte Wright, professor of community child health at the University of Glasgow, stated that, while the college had progressively distanced itself from formula manufacturers over the years, it still derived income from trade stands at conferences.

Wright said that the details of any ban on the college receiving income from formula manufacturers would still have to be worked out. She said that the proposal was not a blanket ban on the college having commercial links with any organisation with ties to breast milk manufacturers. For example, the college might eventually decide that it can no longer work with any organisation deriving more than 10 or 20% of its income from manufacturers.

"It's the explicit engagement that's the problem," she said. A junior doctor told the AGM that he was horrified to see that Nestle had a stand at a conference. "A lot of people were moved by that," she said.

"One of the college's arguments is that it's important for them to engage with companies because they make life saving milks for babies. That argument misses the distinction between genuine collaborative research and taking bribes," she said.

Wright said that she hoped that the college's council would accept the decision but it might decide to ballot all members. Wright and others proposing the motion offered to present their arguments to the council in July.

The motion highlighted the World Health Organisation and Unicef code on the marketing of breast milk substitutes, which stresses the need for health workers to be independent of promotional influences, such as sponsorship of professional associations.²

Patti Rundall, policy director of the campaign group Baby Milk Action, said that she was "thrilled" with the news of the vote.

"I hope the council will follow through and hear the message from members," she said. "We need independent voices and we need the RCPCH to carry on doing what it has always done, which is speak out about what is bad for infant health. If it's compromised it will be bad news for child health, not just in the UK but globally."

- 1 Gulland A. Paediatricians call on royal college to drop financial ties to infant formula firms. *BMJ* 2016;353:i2221. doi:10.1136/bmj.i2221 pmid:27093878.
- 2 World Health Organization. International code of marketing of breast milk substitutes. 1981. www.who.int/nutrition/publications/code_english.pdf.

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